

# Protean Memorialisation: International Holocaust Remembrance Day as a Digital Site of Memory on Twitter

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## Abstract

Can social media spaces host sites of memory (or, as Pierre Nora called them, *lieux de mémoire*), and how do user congregations at such sites evolve? This article examines a decade-long collection of tweets about the International Holocaust Remembrance Day to investigate how digital sites of memory are produced and evolve on platforms like Twitter. By applying computational text analysis to operationalize the definitional features of a site of memory, the study explores the discursive composition of the Holocaust Remembrance Day as a memory site, the evolution of the site’s relevance over time, and the user dynamics that shape this composition online. As part of this exploration, we introduce the idea of protean memorialization, a form of digital memorialization characterized by changes in the discursive composition of a memory site, but not its relevance. We conclude by discussing the limitations of our work and directions for future research.

## Keywords

computational analysis; digital culture; history; Holocaust Remembrance Day; Holocaust; *lieu de mémoire*; memorialization; memory; X

## 1. Introduction

Sites of memory (or *lieux de mémoire*) refer to the material and symbolic embodiments of the past through which “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora, 1989, p. 7) long after social memory disappears. They are akin to “shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (p. 12), put in place by communities—in the form of local statues or entire cities (Rothberg, 2010)—to defend against the acceleration of time and forgetting. These sites of memory reconstruct and anchor a shared past, imperfect

though it may be, through their material, symbolic, and functional properties, making them indispensable to their respective communities.

The advent of digital cultures, however, begs questioning: Can digital sites of memory be produced? How are they different—materially, symbolically, and functionally—from their non-digital counterparts? And does the emergence of digital sites of memory alter remembrance? Answering these questions is essential to understanding the formation and reconstruction of communal memories. These processes are increasingly shaped by (relatively) broad participation and hyperconnectivity on social media; however, the consequences of this transformation for memory remain unclear. Will it prevent the formation of memory sites due to the ease of capturing and preserving memories online (Hoskins, 2016), which makes the past ever-present and abolishes the need for its anchoring? Or will the increased reliance on digital technologies (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021; Prey & Smit, 2018) sideline active remembrance and, as Nora puts it, cause the sea of living memory to recede faster, prompting the yearning to resist the technologically accelerated passing of time through memory sites?

Our work addresses these questions by exploring how digital sites of memory change in meaning and relevance over time. Nora proposes two formative features of a site of memory: First, it counters the acceleration of time; and second, it metamorphoses over time by bringing different “presence of the past within the present” (Nora, 1989, p. 20) in each instance of its revival. So far, research has focused on the former feature, leaving the latter—despite its relevance—largely understudied. We use this gap as our entry point to examine how periodic congregation of an online community around a digital site of memory influences its relevance.

For this aim, we focus on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day (observed on 27 January) and its online commemoration on Twitter (currently “X”) over 10 years (2011–2021). Every year, this date brings together global audiences to remember, observe others remember, and leave traces of remembrance for the future. Using a unique dataset of 335,435 tweets, we trace these interaction dynamics through computational text analysis. The analysis explores the discursive composition of the memory site, its temporal changes, and the participatory mechanisms that shape these dynamics. We derive from these findings how the meanings associated with digital sites of memory change in relation to platform affordances and the ongoing connective memory turn.

The article is organized as follows. First, we discuss research on transformations of sites of memory in the digital age, particularly in relation to Holocaust remembrance, to identify research gaps and propose our research questions. We then introduce our dataset and our analytical strategy. This is followed by a computational assessment of the evolution of the discursive composition of Holocaust Remembrance Day as a digital memory site. Finally, we contextualize the findings by introducing the concept of protean memorialization that encapsulates a distinct feature of digital sites of memory, along with directions for future research and the current limitations of this work.

## 2. Related Work

### 2.1. Sites of Memory in the Digital Era

The emergence of new digital media formats, from memes (González-Aguilar & Makhortykh, 2022), commemorative videos (Knudsen & Stage, 2013), hashtag campaigns (Fridman, 2023), to user-generated history lessons (Adriaansen, 2022), has altered our relationship with the past by disrupting existing memory practices and producing new ones. It is no longer clear who is merely a memory producer or a memory consumer (Recuber, 2012) or if traditional gatekeepers of the past, for instance, heritage institutions, are still relevant (Hoskins, 2017). The convenience of producing digital content has also increased the amount of information available about individual and collective pasts, inevitably adding “velocity to the forging of and contestation over what the memory of an event will be” (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021, p. 681).

This connective turn in the formation of memories challenges the spatial grounding of sites of memory. Hoskins and Halstead (2021, p. 675) suggest that the ongoing ontological shift leads to the “liberation of memory from the spatial archive.” This disconnection between communal memories and physical places has an ambiguous effect: It changes who can participate in the processes of remembrance and shape emerging sites of memory across geographical borders, and simultaneously transforms the mechanisms of forgetting and erasure. If earlier, memories attached to a place could be “defaced, pulled down, removed or erased” (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021, p. 676) by new generations finding them intolerable and undesirable, then the platformization of remembrance makes such erasure difficult (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011), questioning the need for the emergence of memory sites in the way Nora understood them.

The (dis)entanglement of space from digital cultures of remembrance gives rise to new commemorative practices (Frith & Kalin, 2016; Hoskins & Halstead, 2021). On the one hand, traditional memory sites end up displaced. For instance, curated archives—the “ultimate spatial metaphor of memory” (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021, p. 677)—are now contrasted by instantaneously produced digital forms of archiving that facilitate remembering. On the other hand, digital technologies enable new dimensions for the spatiality of memory sites. Impulsively photographing material memory sites and digitally sharing them (regarding the Holocaust, for example, see Lundrigan, 2020) is one example of how the physical aspects of memory sites are projected in online spaces.

Under these circumstances, a few scholars considered how Nora’s concept can be adapted to digital environments. For instance, Verploegen (2022) traces how a Dutch nature observation platform, designed as a digital participatory archive, emerges as an online site of memory for communities that memorialize their interactions with nature and its preservation. Similarly, Müller (2017; studying Indian digital archives) and Cunha Matos et al. (2013, studying history-related websites) show how digital platforms emerge as anchors for preserving memories that are at risk of disappearance, and how these anchors enable a “polyphony of memory” (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2020, p. 134) online. In some instances, the enormous volume of data on specific memory dissolves its materiality to the point that anchors become imperative for tangibly locating its peripheries (Makhortykh, 2023).

The integral constituent of this process has been platform affordances, which “shape the ways in which these memories are (automatically) produced, collated, and how they come to matter to people in everyday”

(Smit et al., 2024, p. 1). The effects of specific affordances on remembrance have been explored for diverse platforms, like YouTube (Drinot, 2011; Makhortykh, 2020; Savvides & Ferra, 2024), Facebook (Coromina & Molina, 2018; Manca, 2019; Pfanzerter, 2015), Instagram (Adriaansen, 2020; Lundrigan, 2020; Schreiber et al., 2025), or Twitter (Dufays et al., 2021; Sumikawa et al., 2018; Walden & Makhortykh, 2023). Besides, platform affordances can coalesce to produce larger effects: for instance, by fragmenting platform audiences (Wei et al., 2014) and producing a fractured landscape for memory communities in which connectivity is experienced only within specific platforms rather than across them. Similarly, the use of algorithm- and AI-driven information curation can cause different individuals within the same community to access memories differently (Makhortykh, 2024; Prey & Smit, 2018; Richardson-Walden & Makhortykh, 2024).

The strong influence of platform affordances on the construction of digital sites of memory suggests that these sites must differ in some ways from their traditional counterparts (Adriaansen & Smit, 2025). But what exactly are these differences? To address this question systematically, we propose considering the constitutive ideas of memory sites.

First, Nora (1989) suggests that what makes any site a site of memory is a community's will to remember it. We argue for this resolve in relation to the Holocaust Memorial Day in the following subsection. Identifying this will empirically and show how it can be traced using platform affordances, however, remains a challenge, and we discuss ideas about how to do so in our concluding remarks.

Second, sites of memory are material, symbolic, and functional, and these three aspects are embodied in a range of objects, events, locations, rituals, and notions preserving the past (Nora, 1989). These three aspects are arguably applicable to digital sites of memory emerging on platforms like Twitter. The production of content on the platform (and the platform itself) is materially grounded, following a particular design, including, for instance, access principles and user interfaces. The platform and its content serve a functional purpose by helping users reach their audience, connect with peers, and participate in digital discussions. Besides, Twitter's content features, such as hashtags, provide the platform with unique functionality, helping users find information on a particular topic and serving as "a dissemination feed" (Small, 2011, p. 873). Additionally, hashtags allow conveying contextual information when embedded in a tweet, making them indispensable to a platform that relies on short messaging (Scott, 2015). Lastly, congregating on Twitter has long carried a certain symbolic aura. The platform has often been associated with political activism (e.g., using hashtags to convey one's political position or emotion; see Makhortykh & Lyebedyev, 2015; Rho & Mazmanian, 2020) and continues to influence global politics.

Third, Nora (1989, p. 19) outlines two key features of memory sites. One is their ability to "stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things." Most of the research noted earlier focuses on this aspect, examining how digital memory sites come into being to facilitate remembrance for specific communities (Cunha Matos et al., 2013; Huber, 2023; Reading, 2011). On the other hand, it is the site's capacity to metamorphose and evolve over time. Nora demonstrates this through the example of *Tour de la France par deux enfants* and how it entered and exited collective memory cyclically between 1877 and 1977 to convey a different "presence of the past within the present" (Nora, 1989, p. 20) in each case. However, despite the possibilities for tracking the evolution of digital memory practices over time through datafication, there has been little work examining how platform-based memory sites evolve. To address this limitation, we analyze how the discursive composition of Holocaust Remembrance Day on Twitter changed over a decade.

## 2.2. Holocaust Remembrance and Digital Sites of Memory

The Holocaust remembrance is made of a complex amalgamation of sites of memory. Being the most documented mass atrocity in the history of humanity, the Holocaust has a major impact on how memories of other genocides are represented and engaged with (David, 2017). This impact is enabled through material and immaterial memory sites, including the memorials (e.g., Auschwitz or Buchenwald), the commemorative events (e.g., the International Holocaust Remembrance Day), and the works of art (e.g., *Schindler's List*). In recent years, many of these sites have been profoundly affected by advances in digital technology (for a review of research, see Tirosh & Mikel-Arieli, 2023).

Much discussion of the digital transformations of Holocaust-related sites of memory has been focused on the risks of Holocaust denial and distortion (Allington, 2017; Guhl & Davey, 2020; Whine, 2020). One consequence of the hyperconnected memory ecosystem is an increased capacity to contest established memory practices. While such contestation in the case of the Holocaust does not always result in genocide denial (see, e.g., Gibson & Jones, 2012), it enables new possibilities for appropriation and distortion of the past suffering. At the same time, a growing number of studies have highlighted the widespread adoption of digital technologies, including social media platforms, by Holocaust memorial institutions (Rehm & Manca, 2021; Walden & Makhortykh, 2023; Walden et al., 2023).

Among different sites of memory related to the Holocaust, the Holocaust Remembrance Day occupies a particular place. Introduced in 2005, it became an important milestone in internationalizing Holocaust remembrance (Kaiser & Storeide, 2018). Over the years, the Holocaust Remembrance Day has been gaining more prominence in digital environments, being commemorated by Holocaust institutions through online campaigns aiming to increase public awareness and preserve memories about the Holocaust, especially as it has been fading with the passing of the survivors. However, until now, there has been little understanding of how sites of Holocaust memory have been evolving outside institutional environments, specifically on platforms such as Twitter.

The importance of achieving such an understanding is due to the growing significance of online Holocaust memory practices. While physical heritage sites remain crucial for Holocaust remembrance, recent events, such as Covid-19 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrate that the possibility for in-person attendance of such sites (and, consequently, the stability of traditional commemorative practices) cannot be taken for granted (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2021; Walden, 2022). It also reflects what Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2021, p. 1098) refers to as “the ongoing generational change” in how information about the past (including the Holocaust) is discovered and consumed. Specifically, this change concerns the growing reliance on online media for learning (and, in some cases, for preparing for visits to physical websites), as well as the memory that arises from active interaction with the past. Social media affordances facilitate such interactions both through the relatively low cost of interaction and the possibility for immediate gratification, enabling the environment in which memory sites can form.

There are a few methodological and theoretical points worth addressing at this juncture. Methodologically:

- (a) Twitter is now more difficult to access for scholars. Studies have long analyzed digital cultures on Twitter and their relationships to elections (Pal et al., 2016), sport (Jumle, 2026), outreach (Jumle & Karthik KR,

2024), and diplomacy (Jumle & Jaffrelot, 2022), including collective remembering (Adriaansen & Smit, 2025; Sumikawa et al., 2018). However, Twitter's recent platform changes have made its data hard to access, making this study more valuable, as it provides insights into a platform that remains central to digital cultures and memory.

- (b) Working with data over a decade could be seen as a limitation since Nora (1989) suggested that memory sites' relevance changes over numerous decades, if not a century. However, we must be wary of directly superimposing such analytical requirements. Besides social media's recentness, which limits the time period for which data are available for analysis, the connective turn implies an accelerated churn of memories. Additionally, memory datafication enables analysis at the granular level, providing new insights into the micro-changes in the relevance of digital memory sites.

Theoretically:

- (a) We can expect the discourse around Holocaust remembrance on Twitter to focus on core aspects of Holocaust memorialization, including the discussion of the liberation of the concentration camps, victims' suffering, survivor stories, but also the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory and expressions of denialism and antisemitism. However, what is unclear is which of these definitive elements are prevalent and whether their prominence changes over time. It is also unclear how the dynamics of user interaction with content on Twitter give rise to these topical patterns.
- (b) Digital remembering on Twitter—due to the platform's strict character limits—prevents users from invoking the multiple aspects of the Holocaust, at least in a single tweet. We may, therefore, expect users to remember the Holocaust in silos, with different users focusing on different elements of the Holocaust that they consider central to them. As the visibility of specific discourse elements changes, the digital site of memory evolves in its relevance to Holocaust remembrance.

In this backdrop, we propose the following research questions:

1. What are the different topics and sub-topics on Twitter around the Holocaust Remembrance Day?
2. What is the yearly trajectory of these topics and sub-topics over the period of analysis?
3. What are the user engagement patterns that produce topic trajectories?

### 3. Data and Methods

The study builds on Lindgren and Krutrok (2024) and Ben-David et al. (2024) in applying computational text analysis to analyze digital media data. This approach has not yet been applied to study digital sites of memory, which is not surprising given that much research on digital forms of memory remains qualitative. A few exceptions tend to rely on relatively simple statistical techniques (Jensen et al., 2024; Sumikawa et al., 2018) and computational forms of text analysis (Barna & Knap, 2023; Makhortykh et al., 2021); however, none of these studies, to our knowledge, have combined quantitative techniques with Nora's concept.

The data collection and analysis are best understood as a five-step process. First, we used the Twitter Academic API to collect tweets that mentioned the word "Holocaust" between 26 and 28 January for all years from 2011 to 2021, to capture the discourse around the International Holocaust Remembrance Day observed on January 27. This produced 388,704 tweets in total. We then filtered the tweets to retain only

those in English. This produced a corpus of 335,462 tweets; some descriptive statistics are provided in Tables AT01 and AT02 in the Supplementary File.

Second, we preprocessed each tweet (our unit of analysis) to remove hyperlinks, usernames, special characters, stop words, or extra white spaces. Then, tweets were lowercased, tokenized, and lemmatized using WordNetLemmatizer from NLTK (Bird & Loper, 2004). After this preprocessing, the final corpus consisted of 335,435 tweets.

Third, we conducted topic modelling on the final corpus using non-negative matrix factorization (NMF; Lee & Seung, 2000). Topic modelling is a computational technique that takes a set of documents as input and segregates them into groups that may together convey coherent themes (Kuang et al., 2015). We worked with NMF because studies have shown that it performs better than other approaches, such as LDA or Top2Vec (Egger & Yu, 2022), while having relatively low computational cost. We computed a coherence score ( $C_v$ ) across a range of topics (2–20) to determine the optimal number of topics; the hyperparameters are listed in Table AT05. Per this evaluation (see Supplementary File, Figure AF01), similar  $C_v$  of 0.74 and 0.75 were achieved for 10 and 17 topics. Given a balanced distribution of documents, we decided to segregate our corpus into 10 topics. The top 20 unigrams and bigrams per topic are provided in the Supplementary File, Table AT03. We repeat the same topic modelling procedure for the subset of data related to victim remembrance (topic 3) to identify sub-themes within it ( $C_v = 0.72$ , four topics; refer to Supplementary File, Figure AF03).

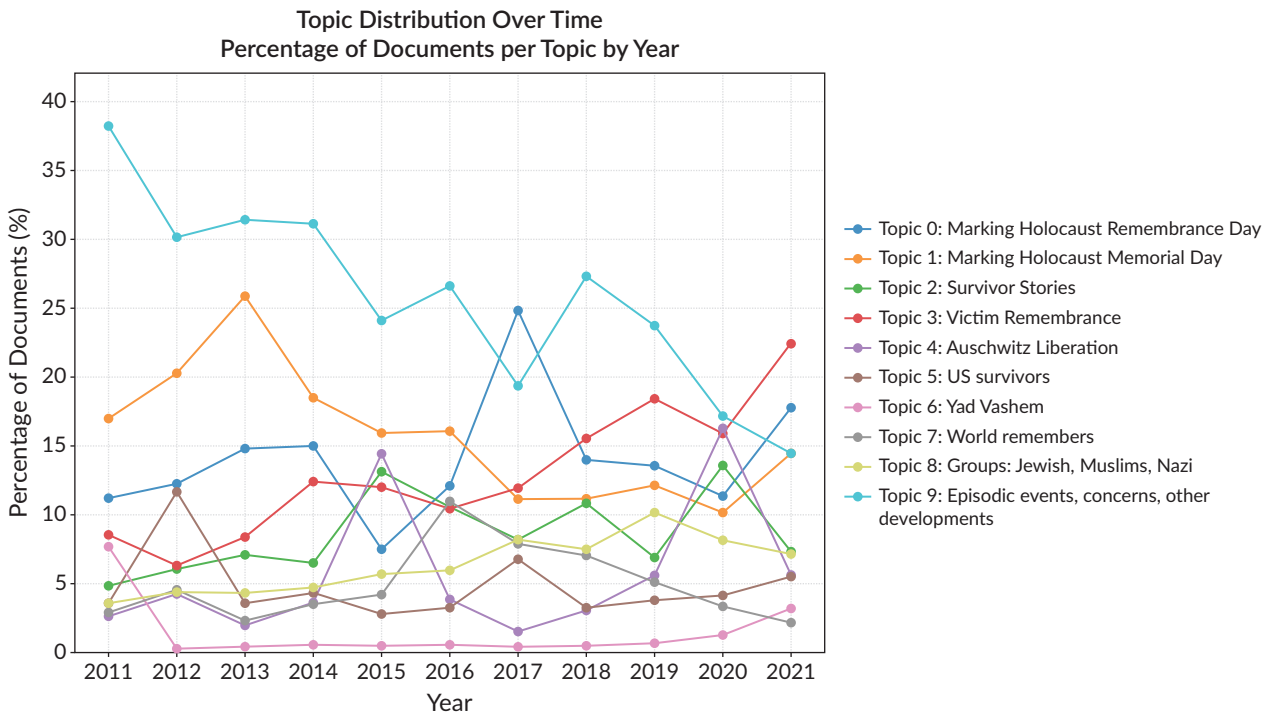
Fourth, by examining n-grams, we assigned each topic a representative title and each document to the most suitable topic based on the probabilistic distribution of its constituent tokens. We then aggregated the number of documents per topic (for the list, see Supplementary File, Table AT04) to examine their distribution from 2011 to 2021. Such an assignment also helped shortlist tweets for an interpretation of the discourse.

Fifth, we examined user engagement with the different aspects of the site of memory over the years. For this aim, we used descriptive statistics in combination with network analysis.

#### 4. Evolution of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Twitter

First, we focus on the themes involved in the discursive construction of a memory site and explore their trajectories over the decade. Figure 1 presents the results of topic modelling: The descriptive titles of each topic are presented in the legend to the right, and each color traces the trajectory of a specific topic over the years. The 10 topics can be divided into five groups.

The first group includes topics 0 (marking Holocaust Remembrance Day) and 1 (marking Holocaust Memorial Day; the latter being the UK-specific commemorative event happening on the same date) that focus on commemorative activities (for instance: “Wednesday marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day”; or “bet you didn’t know that today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day”). These activities are often connected to personal expressions, such as political commentary (“One can’t be a Trump supporting [redacted] and at the same time post about Holocaust Remembrance Day. No Karen”), biographical references (“It’s Holocaust Memorial Day. This is a photograph of my great-grandparents, Joachim and Amalia. Before the war, they owned a woodwork factory in Krakow”), normative reflections (“On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, as we say #NeverAgain, let us recognize and denounce the



**Figure 1.** Topic modelling on the full corpus.

rising forces of hate and division in our society today”), blogging-like statements (“Just back frm UN prog for Int’l Holocaust Remembrance where kids frm Washington Heights Y performed [redacted]. So moving”), or historical narration (“On January 27th, 1996: Germany first observes International Holocaust Remembrance Day. #history”). What remains definitive is a discursive positioning of the Holocaust at the center of remembrance and interpretation.

The second group focuses on the role of actors, including topics 2 (survivor stories), 5 (US survivors), and 8 (other groups), with a particular emphasis on Holocaust survivors and, in some cases, perpetrators. Users refer to the Holocaust through survivor stories (“To mark #HolocaustMemorialDay the Duchess of Cambridge spoke with Holocaust survivors Zigi Shipper and Manfred Goldberg about their experiences and memories of the Holocaust, and of its prevailing impact”), that they may have encountered personally (“Being a Jewish Millennial means that you discover Holocaust survivors in your family at 27. #NeverForget #NeverAgain”) or through an external source (“Article in today’s Times2 about Hanah Sara Rigler, whose life was saved by British PoWs during the Holocaust”). By contrast, topic 3 focuses on victims more broadly (“Today we honor the memories of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the millions of others who were murdered during one of the darkest periods in history. And we recommit ourselves to working towards a society free of hatred and division. #HolocaustRemembranceDay”).

The third group brings forth the material sites of the Holocaust, including topics 4 (Auschwitz liberation) and 6 (Yad Vashem). These sites featured strongly in the Memorial Day-related discourse, with multiple users referring to them on Twitter. It was particularly the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the liberation of which on 27 January 1945 marks the Holocaust Remembrance Day (“Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated 76 years ago today, barely a lifetime ago. We can never forget the horrors of the Holocaust or turn away from the reality that anti-Semitism is still a large and growing threat. #WeRemember”).

The fourth group concerns the normative implications of Holocaust remembrance. It comprises topic 7 (world remembers), which includes commitments to honor victims (“I promised myself, if I survive, I will tell the world what happened in the Holocaust.” Lily Ebert and her great-grandson @DovForman are teaching children the importance of tolerance, using social media to spread a message of hope. #HolocaustMemorialDay #HMD2021...”), countering denialism (“On #HolocaustRemembranceDay we say never again. Over 75 years after the end of the Second World War, Holocaust memory is under threat due to conspiracy theories and disinformation promoting antisemitic narratives. The Holocaust is not a myth and we must #ProtectTheFacts”), and emphasizing the global significance of the Holocaust.

The final group focuses on Holocaust memory in relation to contemporary politics. It includes topic 9 (episodic events), which discusses current atrocities (“This is amazing! The Saudi regime is causing another Holocaust in Yemen and this is a step in the right direction”), legislation (“the next person who compares abortion to the holocaust will be hit in the head, by me, with a loaf of *challah*”), media (“If you haven’t already, watch the harrowing “Night Will Fall” holocaust doc. Incredible, heartbreaking and deeply disturbing footage”), and geopolitics (“Netanyahu orders embassy to meet with Polish PM over new Holocaust law: ‘We cannot allow Holocaust denial’”).

We observe that most topics exhibit significant fluctuations, which are likely attributable to external developments. Topics 9 and 4 are telling cases: The former captures the discourse around short-term developments, like the launch of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Award in 2011, or denialist comments by specific individuals. While topic 4, dealing with Auschwitz, remains stable for most of the period, it notably becomes more visible in 2015 and 2020, marking the 70th and 75th anniversaries of the camp’s liberation. On the other hand, some topics show a progressively rising or falling trend. These are cases of topics dealing with the Holocaust Memory Day commemoration (topic 1) and individual victims and survivors (topic 3). The remaining topics, such as 5, 7, and 8, remain relatively stable over time.

The constitutive sub-themes of the core ten topics also follow certain trajectories. To illustrate this case, we apply the same topic modelling technique to documents associated with topic 3 (victim remembrance), which has grown in relevance over the period of observation. Figure 2 shows that there are at least three distinct sub-themes related to remembrance of Holocaust victims: discursive empathy towards millions of victims who were murdered and should be remembered; calls for a minute of silence for the victims; and references to symbolic lighting of a (digital) candle in memory of the victims (besides a mixed set of other expressions). The figure shows that the first sub-theme has grown in prominence relative to the other means by which users commemorate the victims.

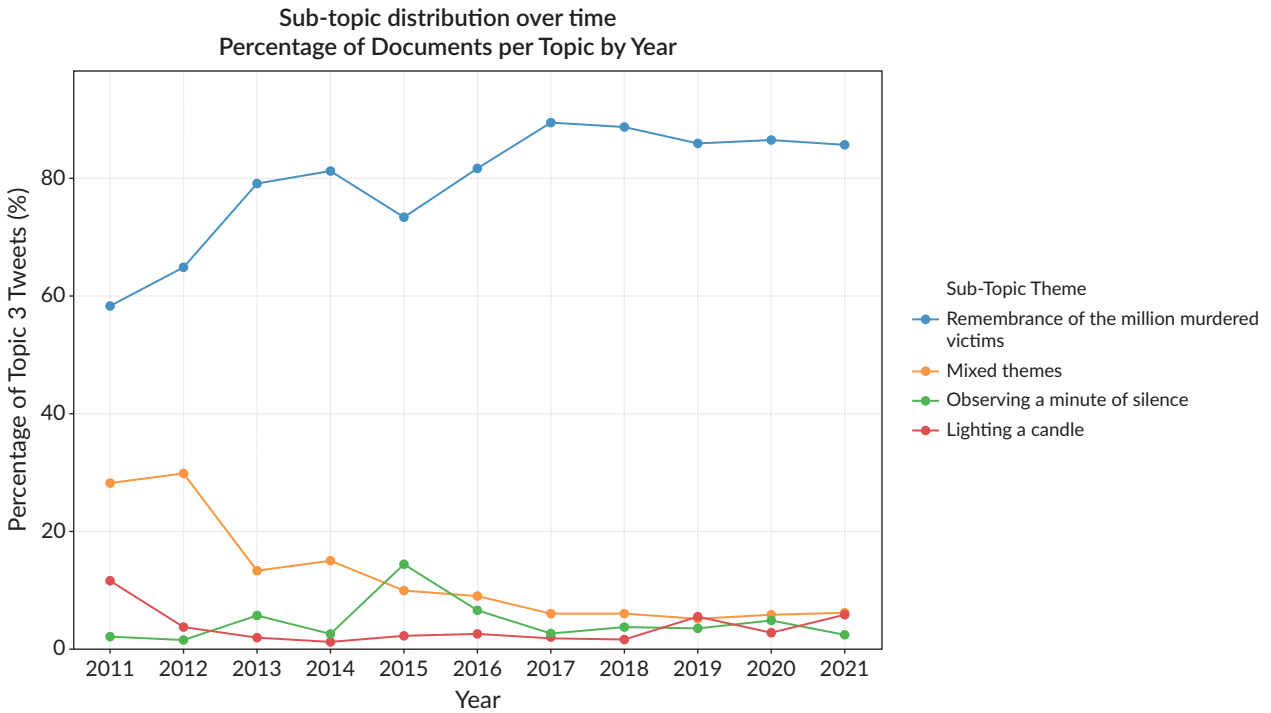


Figure 2. Sub-topic modelling for topic 3 (victim remembrance).

Topics rise and fall in relevance based on users' engagement with a memory site, which is illustrated in Figure 3. Firstly, we observe that most users engaged only with one topic and, relatedly, contributed a single post to the corpus. Only 18.2 percent of users engage with at least two topics, 6.4 percent with at least three topics. Most users engage with topics marking commemorative activities (topics 0 and 1), victim remembrance (topic 3), and episodic events (topic 9). The most active user (an account of the We Remember campaign) posted 490 tweets, whereas the average user posted 1.7.

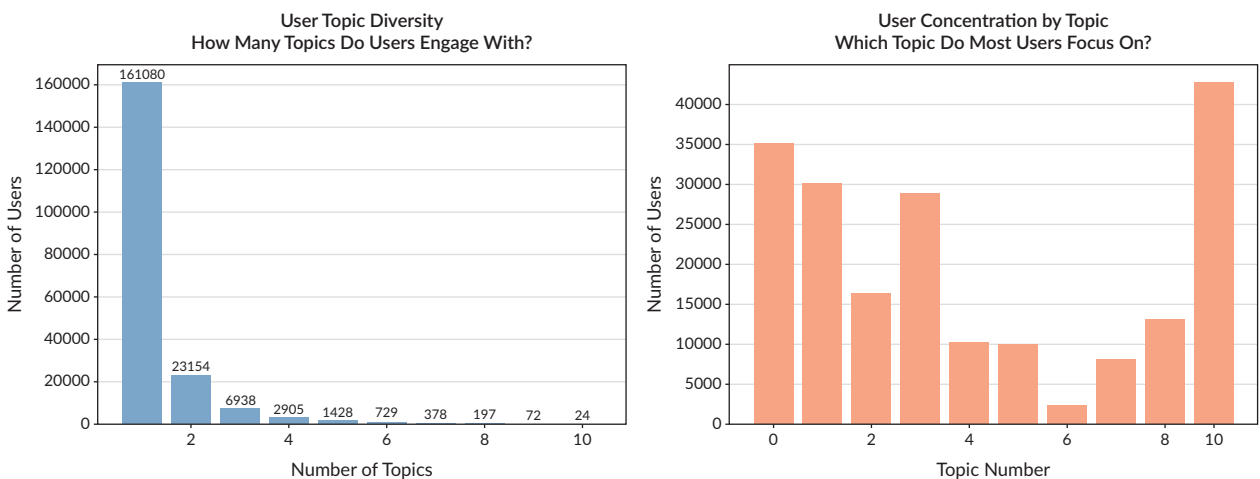
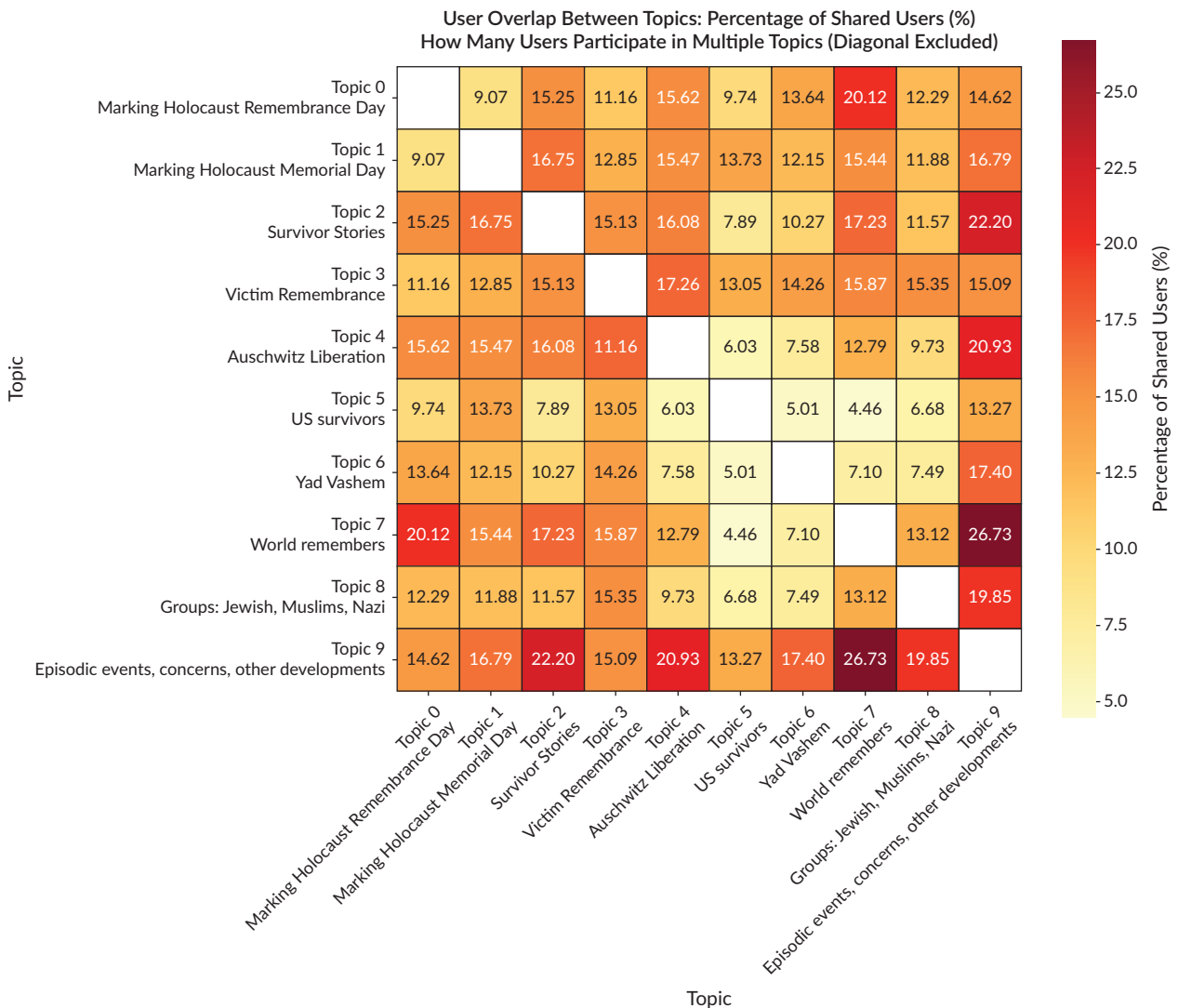


Figure 3. User engagement with topics.

Figure 4 shows how users engage with multiple topics by showing the percentage of users who share each topic. The users most engaged with the topics we noted above (topics 0, 1, 2, 3) tended to overlap more with

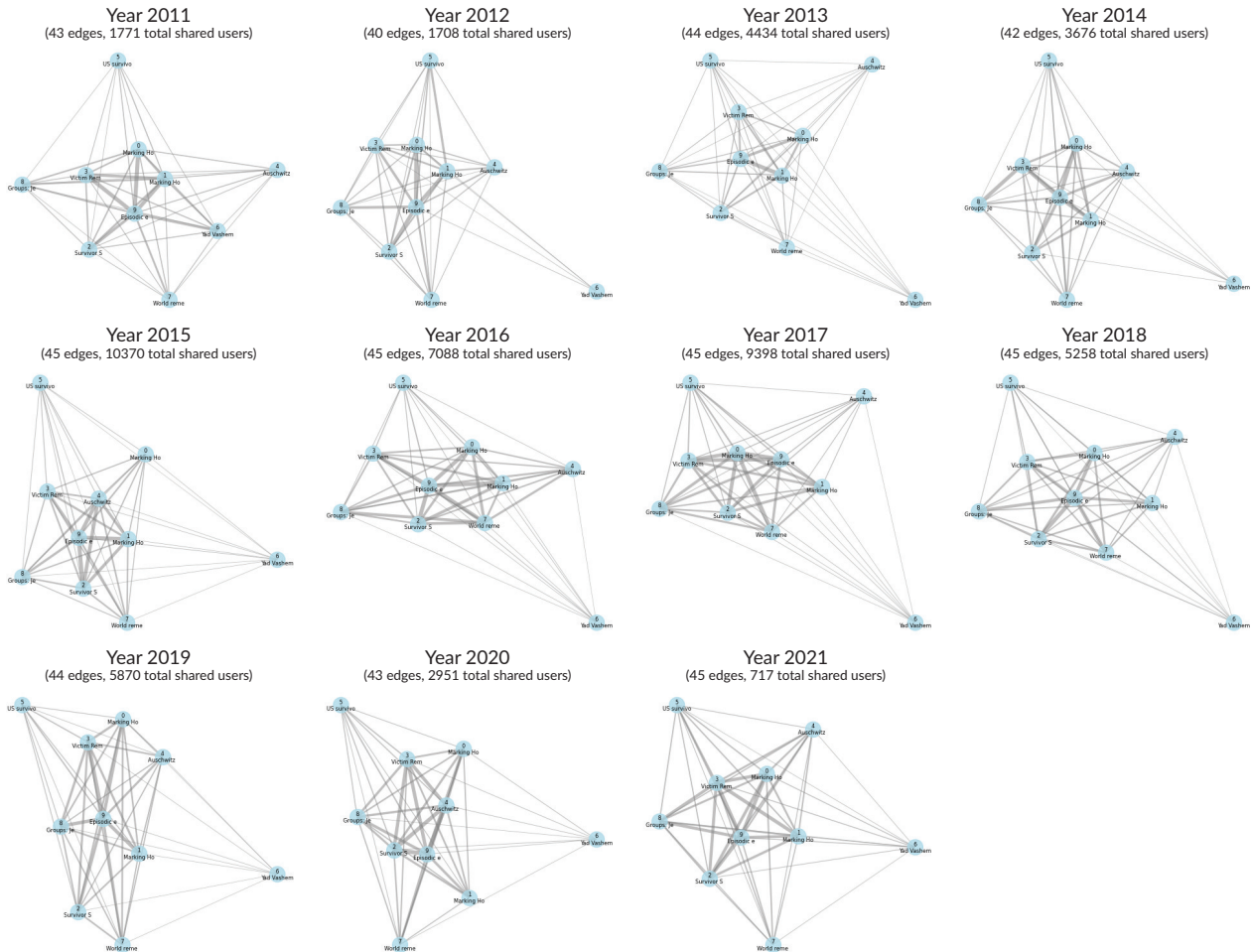
the episodic events topic (topic 9) than with other topics. Among the remaining topics, topic 8 (i.e., other actors) had the highest overlap with these popular topics. Figure AF02 in the Supplementary File provides a complementary representation, with nodes representing the topics and edge width proportional to the number of shared users. It highlights the high connectedness of topic 7 (world remembers), indicating that, while relatively few users engage with the normative implications of Holocaust memory in absolute terms, many of those who do also engage actively with other topics.



**Figure 4.** Heatmap of user participation across topics.

Figure 5 shows that engagement patterns outlined above tended to persist over time. In 2015 and 2020, the topic of Auschwitz (topic 4) grew in its connectedness, likely due to its increased presence in discourse about the memory site around anniversaries. Topic 8, which captures the role of various groups in the Holocaust, notably grew more connected in 2016, 2017, 2018, and to a lesser extent in 2021. This suggests that users' engagement with topics and the overlap among users across topics evolve depending on the specific year's circumstances and contextual factors.

### Temporal Topic Networks Evolution of Topic Relationships Over Time (Edge Width = Number of Shared Users)



**Figure 5.** Longitudinal evolution of user engagement with different topics.

Figure 6 shows the absolute counts and the percentage of the same users engaging with the site of memory across the years. It highlights that the number of users who participate in consecutive years is less than one-fifth in any given year, implying that most users are newcomers who did not engage with the site of memory previously. In absolute terms, there is no clear upward or downward trend in participation, as the platform has added users in most years. Though 2015 and 2020 (as anniversary years) could have been expected to generate the highest engagement, we instead observe the largest number of users in 2017 and 2021. The peak in 2021 can be attributed to the consequences of the Covid pandemic, which intensified engagement with memory online (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2021) due to the inaccessibility of physical spaces, as well as the active instrumentalization of Holocaust memory in the context of anti-vax protests (Parnell & Stuckey, 2023). In percentage terms, 2015, 2016, and 2021 had the highest number of users engaging with the memory site compared to the previous year. Over time, the number of retained users drops to roughly 3–4 percent, indicating a rather small but stable core of users.

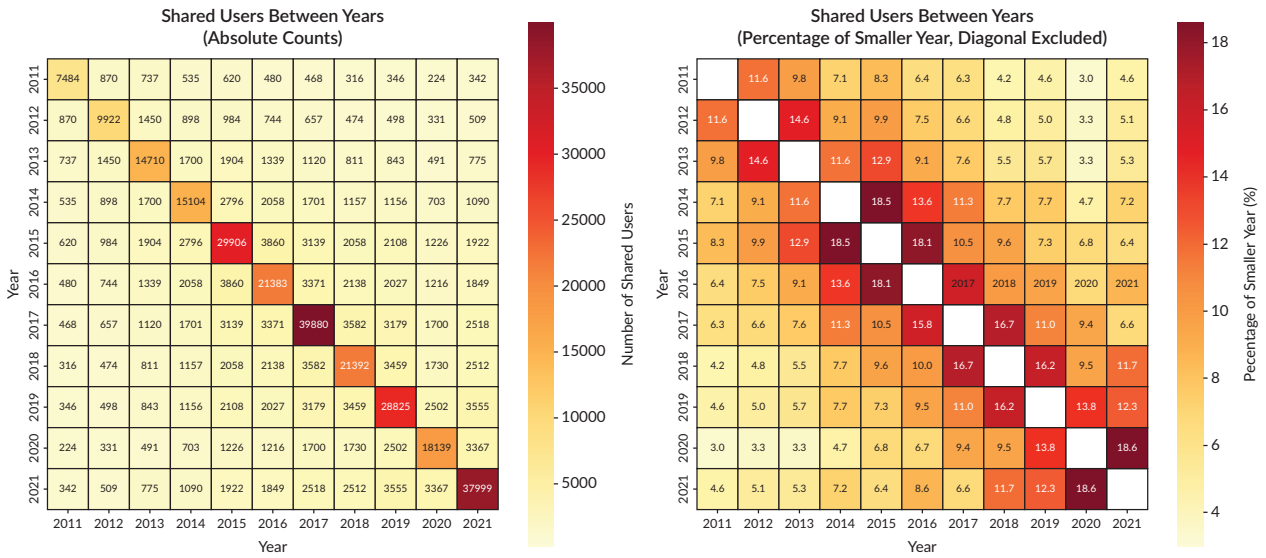


Figure 6. Heatmap of user participation across years, both in absolute and percentage terms.

Figure 7 shows users' participation, independent of specific years. The first bar chart (left) shows that of the 196,905 unique users who engaged with a memory site, only 28,826 (14.6 percent) have participated for at least 2 years. Only one percent of users participate in at least 5 of the years analyzed (right chart). Many of them were accounts of Holocaust institutions, such as the Holocaust Educational Trust, other types of non-governmental organizations, such as the World Jewish Congress, or Jewish community projects.

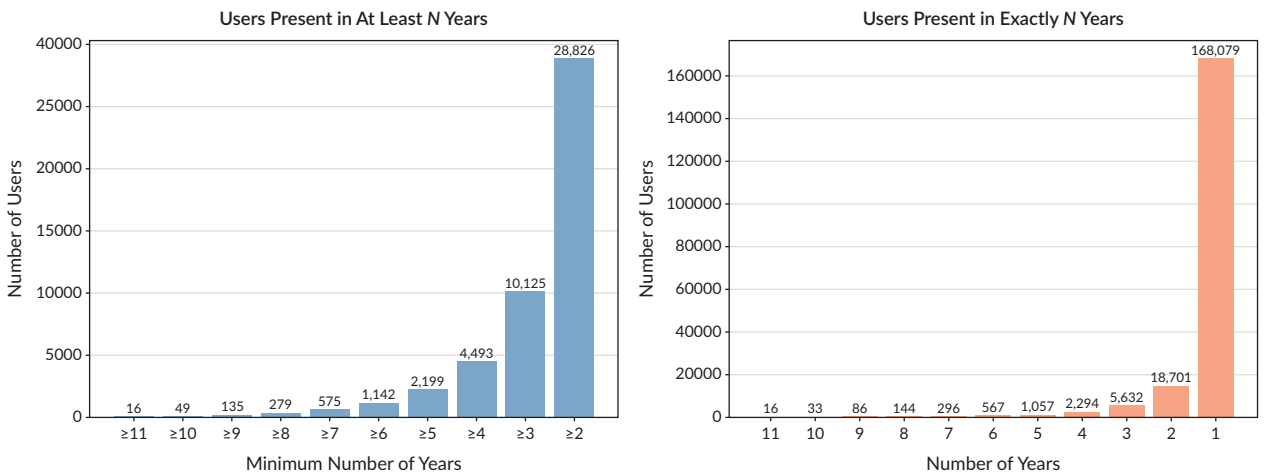


Figure 7. User participation dynamics over the years of analysis.

## 5. Discussion

Our analysis of the changing relevance of Holocaust Remembrance Day as a digital site of memory yields several important observations. We find that each year, memorialization at the digital site attracts a new group of users. The discourse that these changing users spin is characterized by both continuity and disruption of the Holocaust's memory. The disruption is particularly visible at the level of sub-topics (see the results of topic modelling for the sub-themes within the content focused on victims' remembrance), where discourse-specific

rhetoric or actions (such as the calls for observing a minute of silence) rise in prominence only during specific occasions (such as the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz) but remain sidelined the rest of the time. Yet, despite this disruption, no broad topics (except topic 6 in some years) completely evade the users' collective memory.

Remembrance of the Holocaust at its digital site of memory—or, more generally, remembrance at digital sites—we argue, resembles protean memorialization, i.e., a type of memorialization characterized by fluidity within memory communities reflected in the changing discursive formats but not in the relevance of remembering for Holocaust memorialization. Though topics change in prominence, no constitutive topic ever evades Holocaust memorialization, and so, the site does not change in what it represents (as it would if, say, victim remembrance were not to be part of Holocaust memorialization for a particular year). Users, year-on-year, engage with the digital memory site, in evolving socio-political contexts, to memorialize the Holocaust, which is altered in its practice (e.g., at the sub-theme level) but not in its relevance. The core elements of Holocaust remembrance remain broadly preserved across and within the evolving community.

The agencies that intermingle to produce protean memorialization can be split into two groups:

1. Personal agencies: The digital site's relevance is reflective of users' actions, which in turn are shaped by the contextual factors, from social class to personal histories. Users personalize Holocaust remembrance, despite its shared cultural past, through their distinct identities in the present; for instance, through the symbolic (e.g., tweeting with #HolocaustRemembranceDay versus #HolocaustMemorialDay) or rhetorical choices such as reliance on specific vocabulary or slang.
2. Platform agencies: The relevance of the digital site is shaped by the platform's features, including its affordances (e.g., what kinds of content can be produced and how it can be interacted with) and policies (e.g., who is allowed to be part of the platform-specific memory community and what interactions are considered appropriate). However, it also concerns platform ownership and the political views associated with it, which, in turn, shape platform uses. Among US-based online platform owners, there has been a tendency toward aggressive promotion of a particular vision of freedom of speech. It has direct implications for Holocaust-related digital memory sites within these platforms, as such promotion often aligns with the amplification of the voices of right-wing actors, which in many cases propagate distorted or denialist views on the Holocaust.

The exercise of these agencies occurs within boundaries defined by structural factors such as special anniversaries or contemporary political events. Likewise, these agencies, to an extent, dictate the importance of topics like the liberation of Auschwitz over other issues at certain times. Some of these structural factors can also remain implicit (for instance, requirements for digital literacy or stable internet connections that, by design, can gatekeep groups and, therefore, influence the emergent sites of memory).

Protean memorialization, though primarily concerned with the transformation of the form of remembrance at a digital site of memory, can sometimes also materialize as a transformation of its core function (i.e., when a site evolves to enable memorialization of another past). A preliminary analysis of the dataset shows that users used hashtags for the 1988 massacre in Iran, or generally “humanrights,” in relation to the Holocaust. A digital site can, therefore, potentially change function: on the one hand by symbolizing Holocaust remembrance, but on the other, also evolve in its symbolism to act as a pseudo-site for communities with related memories with

whom Holocaust may share political ideologies (such as human rights) or incidents such as mass atrocities (here, the massacre of political prisoners in Iran in 1988).

The idea of protean memorialization can benefit from further analytical descriptions along two affordance dimensions of social media. First is the dimension of within-platform networks. This includes how a user's way of remembering, or, in practice, engagement with a specific topic, affects the preference and memory of other users. Since different users can observe other users participate in the discourse, one can hypothesize that a user's expression of remembrance would affect others' participation. A study at the level of minutes that describes how topics gather mass over the course of Holocaust Remembrance Day would significantly enrich our understanding of how members exercise agency and shape the discursive volatility of Holocaust remembrance over time. The second dimension is that of timeline archiving. This refers to studying how past discourses influence present discourses. Analysis on this dimension would require investigating whether users who participated in previous years return to participate in similar topics. Exploring this dimension directly adds to the proposed concept, since in this case, the immediate discourses of previous members could also be assumed to influence a form of agency, alongside the members and the sites, helping us explain the structure of continuation in the discourses on memory.

## 6. Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates the discursive composition of the Holocaust Remembrance Day as a digital memory site on Twitter and its evolution over time. We show how Twitter's relationship to Holocaust memorialization changes as different facets of memory within the platform become more visible at specific points in time. Using computational methods, we highlight that these facets—or topics—consist of sub-themes (as illustrated by the example of victim remembrance) that follow their own trajectories of retention and forgetting. Hoskins and Halstead (2021) suggest that digital memories are highly unstable, and our empirical analysis demonstrates this flux regarding Holocaust memory. These findings on selective remembrance add to existing work, as previous studies have looked at this phenomenon regarding Holocaust memory only outside of Twitter (Makhortykh, 2017; Wolniewicz-Slomka, 2016). We also introduce the idea of protean memorialization—a form of memorialization that changes form, but not its relevance as contexts change—as it emerges through the interaction of different types of memory agents and their agencies.

Against this backdrop, it is important to note the limitations of this study and outline directions for future research. First, we study a single memory site within a particular platform with a distinct communication style and a specific set of affordances, focusing exclusively on the Anglophone memory community. The choice of the platform is primarily attributed to the data accessibility, which distinguished Twitter before its takeover by Elon Musk. Future research can benefit from more comparative studies, including inquiries into how different sites of memory evolve across online communities and whether the features of protean memorialisation we observed remain stable; such a comparative angle is essential for generalising features of memory sites in the digital age.

Second, in this article, we intend to analyse how the digital site of memory evolves over time, and given the large data volume, we adopted a computational quantitative approach. While such an approach allowed us to make sense and use of the data from the decade of communication on Twitter, it is subject to multiple

limitations. One of these key limitations is the limited ability to capture nuances in the discursive construction of a memory site, which can be achieved through more qualitative approaches, such as close reading. Future research can benefit from applying qualitative approaches (possibly assisted by large language models to enable scaling) to the analysis of digital memory sites and specific user interactions with them to understand the defining features of protean memorialisation.

Finally, the scope of the study prevented us from further exploring how Nora's other ideas regarding the concept of memory sites can be applicable to platform-based environments. For instance, it is worth exploring how more immaterial aspects, such as the will to remember a site, could be methodologically captured. We could theoretically argue that the exercise of this will may be traced through the different forms of memory practices occurring in the digital spaces and their subsequent datafication, i.e., the transformation of human actions into traceable data (Mejias & Couldry, 2019). For instance, Makhortykh (2020) and Savvides and Ferra (2024) examined how YouTube comments (as well as non-verbal forms of interaction with the past) enable the reinforcement and contestation of interpretations related to war-focused sites of memory. Datafication, thus, could help better understand the motivation of users to use online platforms for anchoring the past, including the Holocaust.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The dataset is available from the authors on request.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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